



# John of Damascus

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# John of Damascus (ca. 676–750s?)

- only 1 extant source of his biography; very unreliable
- born in Damascus (Syria); Arabic and Greek-speaking Christian family
- studies classical Greek from a Sicilian monk, Cosmas
- becomes chief chancellor of Damascus after the death of his father
- iconoclast controversy; goes against the Byzantine monarch
- enters a monastery near Jerusalem, ordained a priest



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# The Fountain of Wisdom

A monumental, encyclopedic work

- 1 *Philosophical Chapters*: general introduction to philosophy and logic; definitions, etc.
- 2 *De fide orthodoxa* = on the right belief
- 3 *On Heresies*: arguing against Jews, Muslims, various Christian heresies (monotheletism, monophysitism, Nestorianism, etc.)

Not an original work, rather a compilation of sources (Maximus the Confessor, Nemesius, the Cappadocian fathers, etc. + Aristotle!)



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- *De fide orthodoxa*: Supposed to be the unambiguous position of the Church as it emerged, and was treated like that.
- big impact on Western medieval thought
- the last Greek author to be treated as an authority in the West
- translated into Latin by Grosseteste (who also translates Aristotle), and also by Burgundio of Pisa (12th c.); also translated into Arabic and Old Slavonic.
- Peter Lombard uses it extensively; so does Anselm, Aquinas, etc.

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- assumption: reason is reliable: given by God, able to discover theological truths
- nature (*physis*) = essence; not individual (e.g.: human nature; instantiated by different individual humans)
- *hypostasis* = a nature existing in one particular individual
- Christ has 2 natures, but 1 hypostasis; both natures are preserved (analogy: soul and body in human beings, although those are sub-natures, not real natures)
- 2 natures → 2 activities (*energeia*), 2 wills

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- 1 Why would God create human beings if they sooner or later would sin and be punished?
  - **Gnostic doctrine**: humans were not created by God but by an imperfect demiurge
  - **Christians**: God created the world and everything in it, and in such a way that humans were not determined to do wrong — they had *free will*, by which they had the power to do the right thing in any circumstance, and which cannot be taken away.
- 2 Against Monotheletism: Christ has two wills because of his two natures.
  - need a doctrine of will that will enable us to distinguish between the divine and the human will.
  - need a robust enough doctrine to explain why human will is liable to sin while Christ's (human) will is not.

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- cf. Sotics and Augustine; by John's time, it is a standard assumption
- but not in Aristotle; so John has to say something about that.
- to have a will = to have a basic, distinct, irreducible ability (cf. Aristotle: we do have an ability to recognise something as good, but there is no *further* ability to will; we just will something because we recognise it as good).
- Alexander of Aphrodisias: we can will and nill something in the very same circumstances. – John of Damascus will disagree!!
- main aim of JD: to find a notion of will and integrate it into Aristotle's moral psychology (cf. the scholastic project)



- human actions involve an exercise of the will
- otherwise we would not be responsible (cf. Augustine)
- a person is free if one's choices are not constrained, or one's ability to make the right choices is not reduced (e.g. by wrong habits)

Terminology: θέλησις (will); βούλησις (rational desire; cf. in Plato already); προαίρεσις (choice)

## Will and choice

Certain beings (God, Christ) have a will, but they make no choices. But rational creatures do have to make choices, which presupposes rationally willing things.

So: two distinct functions: rationally desire things + make choices to satisfy these desires

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- all intellects have a will
- God's intellect and will vs human intellect and will: created beings are rational, as opposed to intellectual, and thus they have a particular kind of will: the one that involves making choices.
- Why? God's willing something = its being the case. But created rational beings are finite; they may will something but not realise it, or they have to choose how to attain it.
- so in humans, *willing* is a particular ability, which distinguishes us both from animals and from God
- created things are also corruptible and hence *turnable*. So humans have a turnable will.

Every created thing is by nature corruptible. Every rational created thing can make bad choices.

- we *can* make right choices, but it is never in our nature to *unfailingly* make right choices.
- we can make our nature better by consistently making the right choices; **we are in control of what we do.**
  - what we think about and *how* we think about it
  - how we deliberate

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# Freedom = Control?

We have control over what we do:

- note: God is also free in this sense, even though he does not make choices and does not have alternative possibilities!
- there is no coercion: whether we do good or evil is not forced upon us by our nature or situation
- what we do is partly determined by how we think about a situation; the care with which we think about it
- human beings are in control of their rational soul, but also their non-rational desires and bodily functions!

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# Freedom = Control?

- we always have the ability to choose the right thing
- no force in the world can take it away
- but we also have the ability to *not* choose the right thing; the exercise of the ability is difficult and we often get distracted.
- It's not that we choose between 2 options. Rather, by the time we make the choice, we have already eliminated the other options, and only make the choice as regards to whether the remaining option is to our liking.
- Freedom = the ability to do the good.

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# The Details of the Deliberative Process

Assumption: there are things that we rationally desire, but they are not always attainable.

The deliberative process:

- 1 we need to make sure that what we will is indeed in our power
- 2 then, we can proceed to deliberation – whether we should pursue what we want
- 3 we need to form a judgment about which of the possible options is the best to pursue
- 4 we have to be favourably disposed towards the action thus envisaged
- 5 selection/choice: to take or not to take the envisaged course of action
- 6 impulse to take the action
- 7 employ our non-rational nature (appetites, etc.) to do the action

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# Choosing the Good

- Some of these steps may be simultaneous, but the process may go wrong in each of them.
- Whether or not the result is good will depend on our care in the deliberative process.
- We can choose the good even despite all non-rational desires to the contrary
- But choices are habit-forming, so be careful!

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- **Augustine:** no-coercion + indifference(?) + sourcehood
- **John of Damascus:** no-coercion + sourcehood; the ability to choose the good